

WILDLIFE HARVEST AND POPULATION STATUS REPORT

COTTONTAIL RABBITS - 2003

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2003 POPULATION SURVEY

Rabbit counts were conducted along roadsides by Conservation Agents during 1-15 July. Within each county (excluding St. Charles and St. Louis) a 20-mile permanent route is driven at 30 mph. Rabbit abundance improved markedly this year. The 2003 statewide rabbit count of 0.75 rabbits per mile is 14% above the count for 2002 (0.66), but 13% below the long-term average (0.86, 1983-2002) (Table 1, Figure 1). The 2003 young:adult ratio of 1.24 is 3% below the ratio for 2002 (1.28), and 26% lower than the 1986-2002 average (1.67).

Looking at rabbits on a regional scale, total counts were highest (>1.1 rabbits/mile) in the Northern Riverbreaks and Northeastern Riverbreaks zoogeographic regions, moderate (0.63-0.74 rabbits/mile) in the Northwestern Prairie, Western Ozark Border, Western Prairie, and Northern and Eastern Ozark Border regions, and low (<0.53) in the Ozark Plateau and Mississippi Lowland regions (Table 1, Figure 2).

In addition to surveying fixed routes, Conservation Agents provided their perception of rabbit numbers in each county. Their impressions are based on observations of rabbits over the entire county during April-June, observations of farmers, etc. In this evaluation, 4% of the counties were judged as excellent, 38% good, 47% fair, and 11% poor.

Prospects for the 2003 hunting season are good, with abundance being highest in north central and northeast Missouri, and near the long-term average in the Northwestern Prairie and Northern and Eastern Ozark Border regions. Although rabbit populations are still below average, hunters will likely find that rabbits are locally abundant in areas of good habitat and mild nesting-season weather.

2002 RABBIT HUNTING SEASON

Harvest information is collected from a post-season mail survey of a random sample of resident Missouri small game permit holders. Hunting season dates (October 1 through February 15) and the daily bag (6) were unchanged from previous years. The 2002 season harvest of 507,722 is a marked improvement from the record low recorded during the previous year (Figure 3). Last year's harvest, however, is still 66% below the long-term average (1967-2001; 1,479,126). The low harvest of recent years is partly due to a decline in hunters. The estimated number of hunters in the 2002 season, 71,946, is a record low since the survey began in 1967 (Figure 3).

Despite the reduced popularity of rabbit hunting, hunting success continues to be relatively good with the average daily bag in 2002, 1.2, being only 16% lower than the long-term average (1967-2001, 1.4 rabbits/day) (Figure 3). Also, rabbit hunting continues to provide a considerable amount of recreation with 421,985 days spent afield by resident rabbit hunters.

Table 1. Average number of rabbits counted per mile of road along 112, 20-mile routes during 1-15 July 2003 in Missouri.

Zoogeographic Region	Routes	Young:Adult Ratio			Total Rabbits		
		2002	2003	1986-2002 Average	2002	2003	1983-2002 Average
Northwestern Prairie	12	0.86	1.04	1.72	0.73	0.72	0.75
Northern Riverbreaks	11	1.75	1.58	2.11	1.22	1.12	1.39
Northeastern Riverbreaks	20	1.4	1.24	2.14	0.84	1.16	1.13
Western Prairie	13	1.65	1.57	1.87	0.58	0.63	1.06
Western Ozark Border	13	1.32	1.27	1.55	0.61	0.74	0.95
Ozark Plateau	24	0.76	0.94	1.03	0.36	0.39	0.47
Northern & Eastern Ozark Border	12	1.18	1.18	1.42	0.55	0.67	0.55
Mississippi Lowland	7	1.76	0.94	1.39	0.56	0.52	0.78
STATEWIDE	112	1.28	1.24	1.67	0.66	0.75	0.86

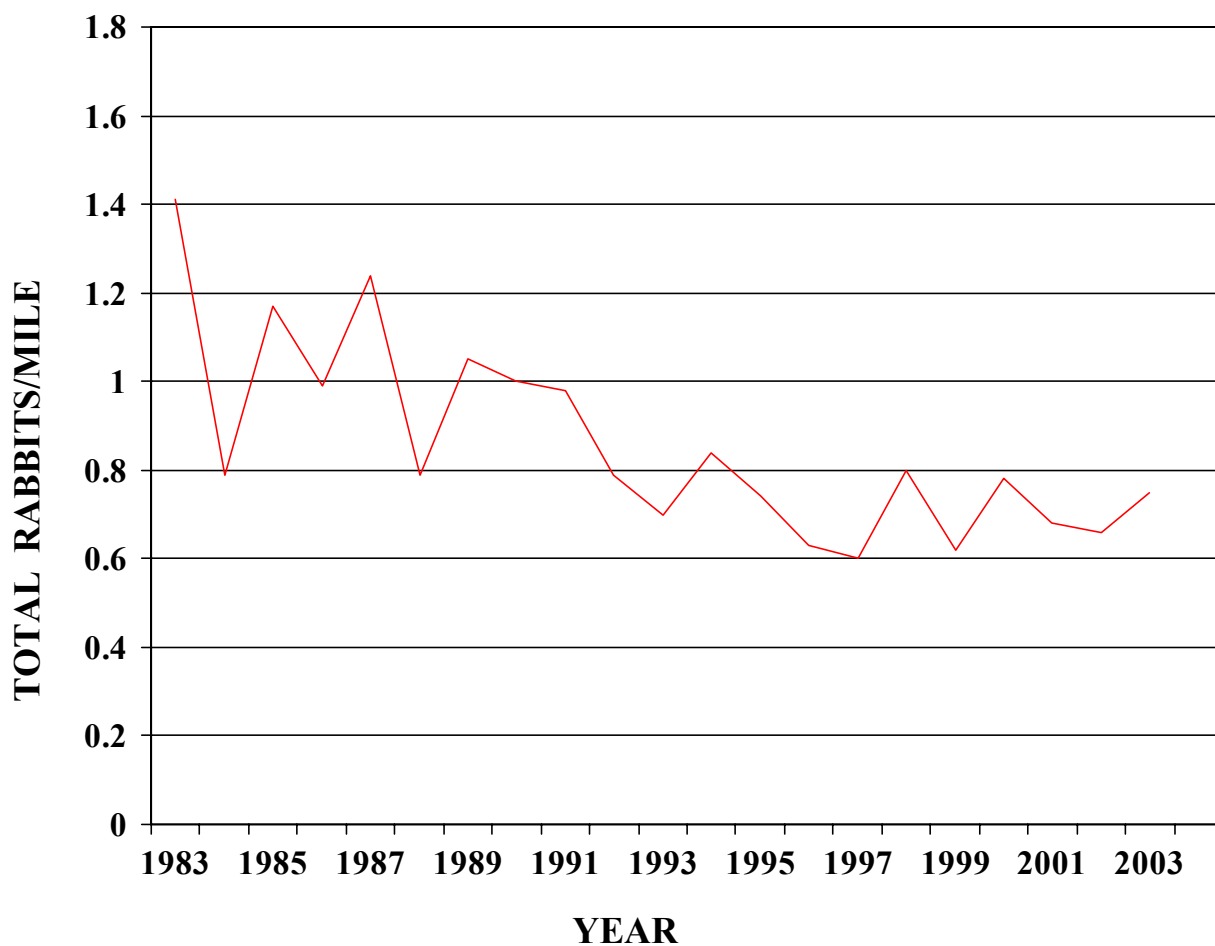


FIGURE 1. Statewide average rabbit count for Agents' Roadside Survey, July 1-15, 1983-2003.

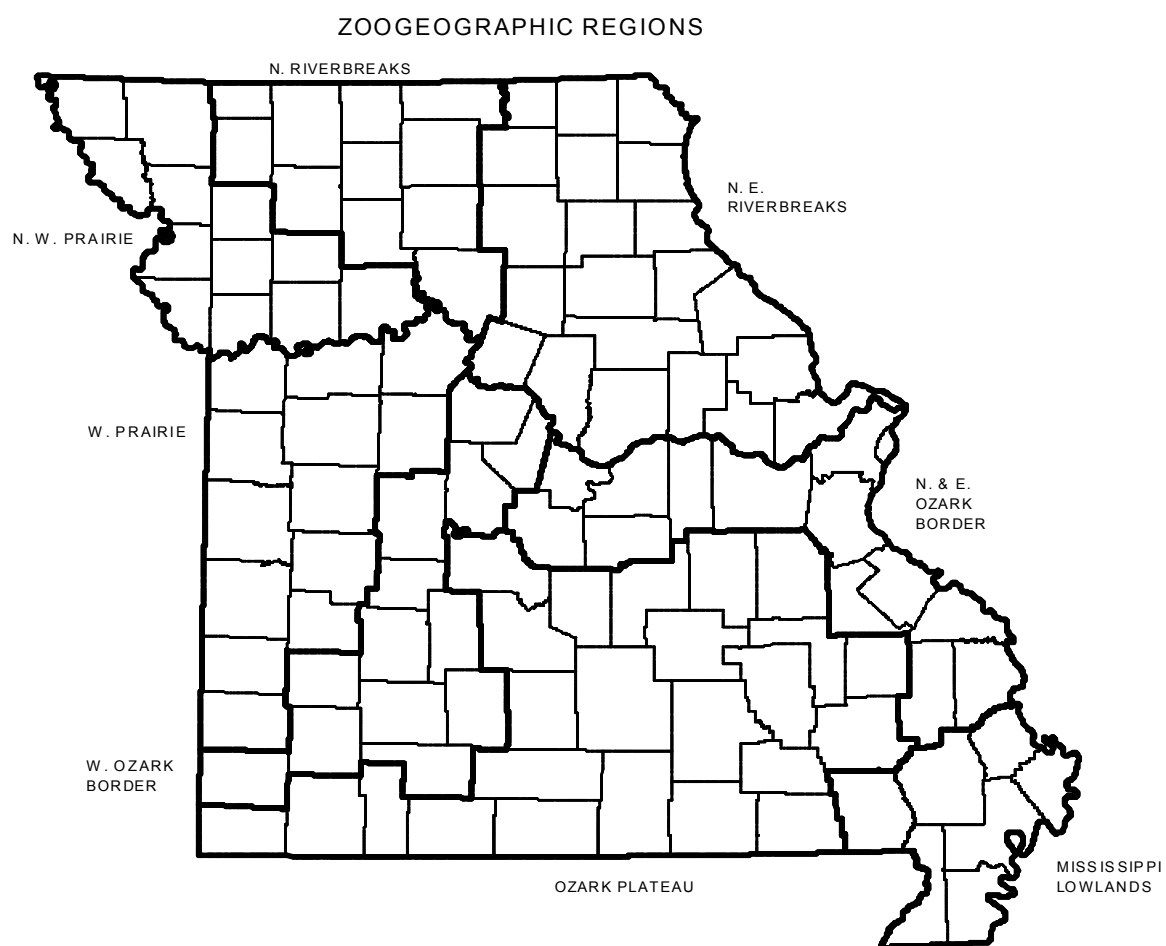


FIGURE 2. Missouri Zoogeographic regions

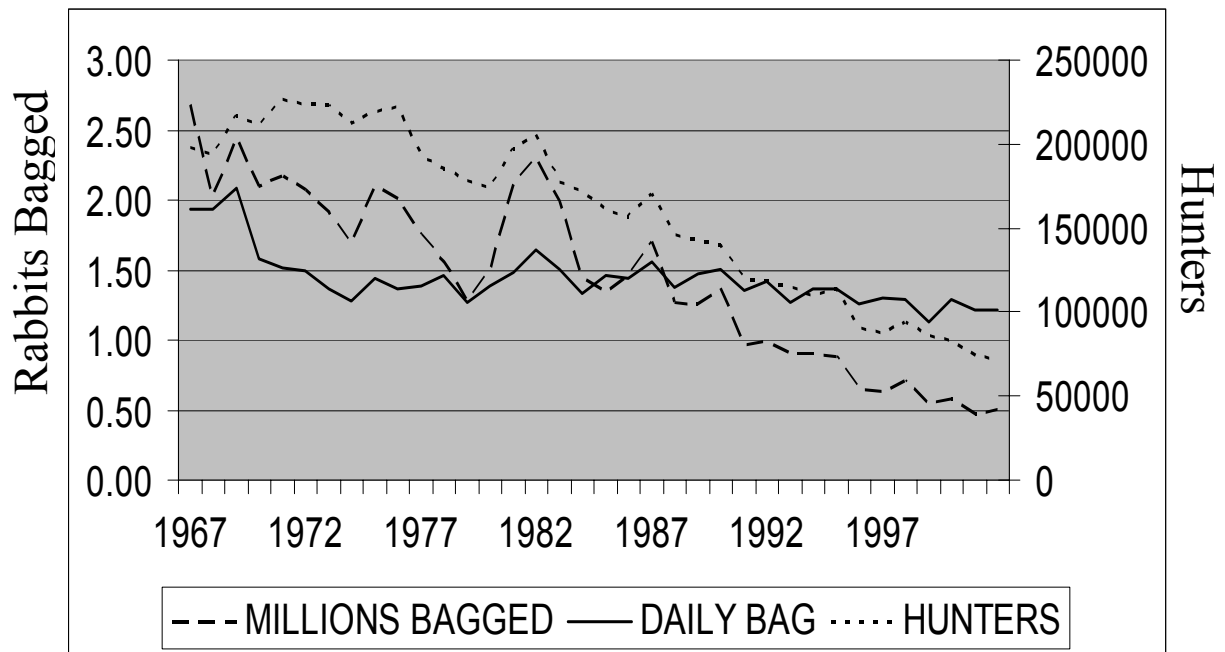


Figure 3. Missouri's rabbit harvest during 1967-2002 as estimated from post-season random mail survey of resident small game permit holders.